Blackface and the Black Arts Movement

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The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was a radical, Afrocentric cultural movement whose participants sought to transform the political, economic, and cultural conditions of African Americans and oppressed people around the world during a particularly volatile moment in the history of racist imperialism. During its most visible period, 1965–1974, BAM artists and activists created dozens of independent, nationally or regionally funded cultural institutions that focused on the needs and aspirations of African Americans; journals dedicated to politics, culture, theatre, and poetry (including a special issue of *TDR* in the spring of 1968); numberless community events featuring artists and activists both nationally known and locally loved; and a noteworthy body of dramatic literature, painting, choreography, poetry, music, and performance. This varied effort reflected the nationalist and internationalist goals of the movement, the strong regionalist tendencies in the African American multiculture (see Smethurst 2005), and the capillary nature of racist power in the United States. It reflected, too, an urge to disengage at all levels and in all ways from the ideologies and institutions of white power. In order to fully enable its spatially dispersed, culturally diverse, and community-situated agenda, the BAM promoted a roots-based,

Figure 1. Norman Bush, Moses Gunn, Douglas Turner Ward, and David Downing playing white citizens in Day of Absence *by Doublas Turner Ward. Photo by Bob Greene of 1967 PBL television production (from Ward [1966] 1971; courtesy of Mike Sell)*

liberatory creativity centered in performance and performance-influenced forms (see Benston 2000; Sell 2005). These varied performativities were understood as conditioned by the locations in which they were enacted—not surprising given the movement's general support for a separatist agenda. The variety and situational articulations of Blackness produced by the critical-creators of the BAM must therefore be kept in mind when we consider a curious fact of the matter. To wit, a significant focus of the movement's performance theory and practice was the history, legacies, and future of that most enduring, ubiquitous, and diverse of racisms: blackface.

Even granting that BAM scholarship is still in a relatively early stage, it is surprising that almost nothing has been written on the relationship between the Black Arts Movement and blackface, and more specifically, on the history and agency of African Americans who perform in blackface. The movement and the works I cite here are entirely absent from Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen's encyclopedic survey of African American blackface performance, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (2012), though the complex, often contradictory ironies they detect in the blackface tradition jibe with those I discuss. Indeed, it was only recently—spurred by Tracy Davis's invitation to consider the question for the 2010 American Society for Theatre Research conference—that I myself recognized the relationship and its significance. That BAM theorists, artists, and activists would be attentive to the issue isn't at all surprising. The repertoire[1] and iconography of blackface were as ubiquitous in the 1960s as they had been for the previous century, even though tectonic shifts in the legal and cultural contours of racism were rumbling from the grassroots to the Supreme Court. It seems that blackface provided a durable mythos for the ideological, institutional, and social reproduction of racism even as inequalities in access and opportunity were judged illegal. This mythos, what might be called "blackface racism," sustained a regime of racial "(mis)recognition," to use Harvey Young's term (2010), at the very moment when African Americans were seizing the means of cultural production, expressing old desires in new ways, articulating unprecedented forms of social gathering and expression, and demanding representation on their own terms.

However, what I find especially surprising is that BAM theorists, artists, and activists found in blackface far more than stereotypes to be destroyed, far more than evidence of the irremediable racism of US culture, economy, and politics. Indeed, they discovered in the repertoire of blackface minstrelsy both an insurgent mode of performativity that deeply problematized the issue of black legibility as well as a tap-line into white anxieties and fantasies about black people. While according to Douglas A. Jones Jr. (2013) and Fred Moten (2003) these had always conditioned the reception of blackface minstrelsy, I would argue that the BAM's multifarious engagement with blackface radicalized those anxieties and fantasies in unique fashion, transforming them into material for radical critique and revolutionary praxis.

What necessitated such an innovative and unprecedented response? The cultural contradictions of antiracist struggle in an era of liberal progressivism were the likely cause. Anti-

1. In *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) Diana Taylor uses the term "repertoire" to describe diverse forms of memory stored and conveyed by gesture, oral performance, movement, dance, song, etc., and is ontologically and politically distinct from the memory of the written archive. My use of the term aligns with Taylor's interest in understanding the distinction between the repertoire and the archive in terms of asymmetries of power and access. Likewise, the term "scenario" is Taylor's; i.e., "meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes" (2003:28). These somewhat open-ended but narratively bounded and normative "scene paradigms" make possible the display of significant social and cultural moments, enabling both the ratification of power relations and their subversion.

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black racism in the 1960s and '70s continued to reference the antique visual, aural, and affective stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy in obvious fashion, but those stereotypes were becoming less and less acceptable in the mainstream. Meanwhile, blackface racism persisted and mutated on a more subtle, less spectacular level, one largely inaccessible to legal reform, peer pressure, or cultural activism. This other, self-obfuscating dimension lacked the easy legibility of rolling eyes, mush-mouthed speech, and dirty jokes. This other dimension of blackface racism manifested on the level of ideology, discourse, and discipline, framing the very conditions of African American visibility and audibility, the very conditions of (mis)recognition. This is why BAM luminary Larry Neal called for those in the movement to prioritize the destruction of the regime of racist commodification that he named the "white thing." As he recognized, any fight against the racist objectification of African Americans had to function on legal, cultural, and ideological/conceptual levels. He argued that such a fight required the most nuanced strategic engagement with white supremacy and its way of looking at the world (what Neal called the "white eye"). And he knew that such a fight would have to radically alter the conditions in which blackness was enacted: theatre architecture, audience demographics, acting methods, critical discourse, and pedagogy, to name but a small part of the complex "infrastructure" of Blackness. To be visibly "Black"[2] in a racist society of spectacle required a strategic reification of Blackness, a highly conscious negotiation of material conditions, a rendering and positioning of the self that made it recognizably "Black"at the same time that it drew attention to the very conceptual categories and modes of production, circulation, and reception in which things such as identity and history were framed (Neal 1968; see also Sell 2005). Taking a note from Young, we see in the BAM's effort to comprehensively identify and counter blackface racism a strategic "project[ion] across individual bodies" that "reveal[s] that embodied experiences develop, in part, from racial (mis) recognition" and the historically specific calculus governing the "idea of the black body" and the "actual bodies" of African Americans (2010:11). It is this strategic projection that I survey here, focusing on the works of several artists, the representation of revolutionary Blackness in their works, and how those representations—and the performances with which they are imbricated—articulate the social, material, and institutional dimensions of racism during a time of tremendous change in the hegemony of white supremacy and our collective understanding of what it takes to challenge it.

The diverse functions and forms of blackface in the BAM articulate a distinctive—and grievously understudied—politics of black performativity that differs fundamentally from both the zero-tolerance policy of the NAACP, which had successfully fought for the cancelation of the *Amos 'n' Andy* television show, and the naively tolerant attitude of many Americans who considered blackface a harmless relic. Further, it represents a critical moment of transformation in the way that African America positioned itself in regards to racist stereotypes. The Black Arts Movement appropriated and deployed blackface in a fashion that both purified its insurgent potential and disabled its role in the commodification and denigration of African Americans. Subsequently, African Americans were able to treat blackface tropes as both unqualifiedly intolerable and, at the same time, a repertoire of culturally volatile gestures.

Amiri Baraka's "A Poem for Willie Best" (1964; Baraka 1991b) is a useful initial example, as it both represents the performance of Blackness and demands a complex syntactical, conceptual, and affective performance from its readers that problematizes black legibility. In the poem, Baraka maps the symbolic, moral, and existential terrain of the African American artist in a racist "society of spectacle" (to recall Guy Debord's coinage [(1967) 1994]), a society in which the inexorable dynamics of commodification and visual fetishism rule over all, reducing everything in its gaze to trademarks and titillating come-ons. Both reflecting and subverting these

2. I will capitalize the term "Black" when referencing the particular construction of African American identity advocated by the BAM. As such, it refers to a proper conjunction of knowledge, activism, and identity distinct not only from "white" but also from "Negro," a term associated with liberal politics and assimilationist attitudes.

dynamics, Baraka crossbreeds modernist poetic techniques and popular cultural imagery, mixing cinematic dreck, classical references (to Dante and the Bible, especially), and the syntax-bending poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Olson. It's a difficult text to parse. The poem's density, opacity, structural complexity, linguistic gamesmanship, and supersaturated intertextuality encrust and displace its primary subject matter.

That subject matter is the recently deceased actor Willie Best (1916–1962), better known as "Sleep 'n' Eat," the name he used in many of his film credits. "Many" is the operative term here: Best appeared in 124 movies and received onscreen credit in 77 (as a point of comparison, Walter Brennan was credited for only 57 of his 125 appearances). In addition to his long career in film, Best had a recurring role on three successful television shows in the 1950s, including *My Little Margie*. Bob Hope called him "the best actor I know," and a generation of actors and directors, including Hal Roach, agreed (in Medved and Medved 1986:28). But that success came at a price: his specialty was the dimwitted, shuffling "coon" of blackface minstrelsy of yore. He was controversial, of course, but he was also successful, an off-tasting example of the American Dream come true, evidence of what could be achieved by African American artists at the height of the US film industry's hegemony. He was, in short, an emblem of blackface racism's profound contradictions. Constructing a finely tuned repertoire to titillate and captivate casting directors and ticket buyers, Best's performance laid bare the structural conditions governing the public expression of Blackness in the BAM era.

The problem for Baraka was how to make sense of Best, the matrix of racist power that he manifested and exploited, and his legacies, particularly as they related to Baraka's effort to construct a strategic representation of Blackness to challenge white supremacy. Dante was the model; Baraka was fascinated by the Italian poet and the *lex talionis* (eye for an eye) punishments he meted out to the damned in the *Inferno*. Following Dante's lead, he places Best in the emblem of his sin: naked despite his earthly wealth, parched despite a never-ending rain, condemned to sing for all eternity, yet "huddled in a doorway, struggling to sing." Grievously wounded, Best's blood washes into "pits whose bottoms are famous. Whose sides / are innocent broadcasts / of another life." But in addition to the macabre moral symmetries of the *Inferno*, Baraka also appreciated Dante's nuanced morality and the unflagging, heartfelt pity he expressed for the damned. Baraka never doubts the righteousness of Best's punishment, but he never allows himself the egotism of self-righteous indignation and never questions the pertinence of the lesson. Thus, though Baraka writes that "no one / will turn to that station again" (1991b:55), he neither denigrates his fellow artist nor presumes that he himself is so distant from the sinner that he cannot learn from him. In fact, as a rising star of both the poetry and activism scenes, Baraka was all too aware of how easy it was to be turned into a stereotype.

Baraka's encounter with Best and his legacies apparently requires more than moral judgment. That actor's fame and fortune were shaped by the hegemony of whiteness, the deeply embedded ideologies of blackface racism, but also by his remarkable performance skills, which enabled him to titillate and exploit white desire to equally remarkable personal profit. For Baraka, any consideration of Best's blackface performance—any utility it might have for the Black Revolution—required the estrangement, warping, and deconstruction of the conditions of representation themselves; in this case, a poem that manifests the destruction of syntax, the overdetermination of symbols, and the juxtaposition of profoundly different modes of expression. This leads Baraka to introduce another performer into the poem, a wandering blues singer who carries a guitar, a magical bag, and a penchant for trouble. This performer goes unnamed, and unlike Best, he is mobile, wandering the roads of a mythical Southern landscape. If the actor is trapped for eternity in a freezing pit, his damaged, pitiable visage continually on view, the musician is a nomad, traveling the roads in search of a living. In contrast to the lines that describe Best, which encrust the actor in overdetermined figures, the bluesman's lines figure him and his possessions in figures of shifting referentiality and diacritical dysfunction, such as parentheses that open but are never closed:

(reading this, the other, crosses then
rushes into a wood
5 lbs neckbones.
5 lbs hog innards.
10 bottles cheap wine.
(The contents
of a paper bag, also shoes, with holes [...]
(The contents
again, holy saviours
300 men on horseback
75 bibles
the quietness
of a field... (Baraka 1991b:55)

If the objects that sustain the musician's Blackness are continually shifting—and, by extension, so are the signifiers of authentic Blackness—the responsibility to make use of them is no less incumbent on the poet. "All This should be / invested," Baraka writes, simultaneously figuring economy (investing in something that will change in value), power (investing an office with official capacity), and sartorial transformation (investing an individual in a role by giving clothing to them, as in the university tradition of graduating students in robes). And all this is done in a fashion that erases the boundaries between the textual representation of blackness—the realm of discourse and metaphor—and its material manifestation, the site of enunciation, motion, and the gaze. Baraka's poem exemplifies the BAM's efforts to attack blackface racism simultaneously on the level of spectacle and discourse.

The conjunction of Best and the bluesman—of immobile visibility and mobile, shifting referentiality—maps a contradiction for Baraka: To represent Blackness, one must submit to a strategic reification of self, congealing motile identity and expression into immobile spectacle. For Baraka, this contradiction is a kind of crossroads, but this crossroads is not a site for decision-making, not the mythic crossroads where the bluesman must decide whether to sign away his soul to the devil in exchange for skill and fame. Baraka has never had much interest in individualized conceptions of morality (indeed, we will see that such conceptions are particularly vulnerable to racist appropriation and therefore were generally avoided among BAM artists). The crossroads in "A Poem for Willie Best" is, rather, a site of ontological perplexity and performative irony, a place where identity is at risk, a place where identity is secured, and a place that enables an insurgent form of radical motility that rallies both performance and discourse to the cause. The "authentic" Black man is, as Baraka memorably phrases it,

A renegade
behind the mask. And even
The mask, a renegade
disguise. (1991b:59)

Here we find an emblematic figure of the African American artist in a society of racist spectacle. "A Poem for Willie Best" suggests that there is no escape from blackface racism, only strategic and shifting positions with respect to it, positions that, if they are to be truly empowering, must dexterously encompass not merely the representational heritage of blackface but also the medium of expression itself. This lesson is found in each of the works I explore in this article.

A Note of Caution

Before delving further, a note of caution. The performance of Blackness that the Black Arts Movement theorized and practiced was only in part determined by blackface racism. The movement deployed performance in a rich variety of ways—performance that was oriented toward many issues and opportunities. For example, BAM artists used performance as a

consciousness-raising tool, a practice of historical recovery that acknowledged, celebrated, and advanced the accomplishments of African American oratory, dance, music, the dozens,[3] theatre, and other performing arts. Performance also restored, recognized, and revitalized the oral dimensions of traditional and popular African and African American culture against the linear, text-based culture of the West. It served to bridge the gap between vanguard artists and the African American masses in the form of neighborhood street-corner performances and local cultural centers that recruited and promoted local artists and organic intellectuals.[4] Performance enabled artists and activists to recognize and valorize the everyday culture of African American social and cultural spaces, private and public alike. Finally, performance was a vital mode of anticapitalist cultural and social production, a way to counteract and disable the centuries-long commodification of African bodies, epitomized by the "social death" of slavery, to recall Orlando Patterson's phrase (1982).

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But even granting the scope and richness of critical performance practice and theory in the Black Arts Movement, the question of Black performativity inevitably returned to the question of *recognition*, of the politics of form and context that emerge any time an African American body is *represented as Black* in order to be looked at, admired, sympathized with, or desired. Thus, the BAM's poems, plays, rituals, dances, curatorial constructions, street-corner speeches, and essays can be usefully understood as explorations of the reticulated complexities of engaging with the "master's tools" of the blackface tradition, tools partly created by African Americans, tools perfected by African Americans not only in bona fide burnt-cork performance (e.g., the expert comic turns of Bert Williams), but also in the more attenuated, obfuscated, motile, and self-congratulatory forms of blackface that brought fame and fortune to the likes of Willie Best and, yes, Amiri Baraka.

The Blackface Performer as Scapegoat

Given the movement's militant stance against both white supremacy and the liberal-bourgeois status quo, and given the fluid ironies I have identified in Baraka's poem and in the history of African American performance in blackface, it's not surprising that many in the BAM tended to censure any kind of "blacking up," whether it be "tomming" before white authority (i.e., acting in a subservient, self-effacing fashion) or puffing up one's militaristic machismo to get donations from guilty liberals ("Mau-Mauing," as Tom Wolfe called it [1970]). However, even a hardline response to blacking up did not justify simple, heavy-handed approaches.

Consider Baraka's *Slave Ship* (1967; Baraka 1978). Borrowing heavily from Artaud and the Living Theatre, *Slave Ship* is a harrowing, inspirational environmental performance that exposes its audience to the suffering of the Maafa, the holocaust of slavery. Attempting to recreate the heat and stench of a slaver, Baraka designed the piece so that the audience sits in darkness while the performance occurs all around them. This "historical pageant," as Baraka subtitles it, has as its bête noire a shuffling, supplicant Tom. In contrast to the slaves and revolutionaries who move around the audience in darkness, this ignominious traitor always appears alone, cast in a high-

3. The dozens is a two-person game of ritual insult, typically involving comments about the players' mothers, ending when one player gives up or resorts to violence.

4. Antonio Gramsci identifies as "organic intellectuals" those individuals who provide their communities with the language to reflect on their history, activities, and culture and to articulate them within the broader contexts in which they develop (2010).

beam spotlight in the center of the performance space. He is a mercurial figure, too. In his first incarnation, he is a house slave who abets the suppressors of the Nat Turner revolt. Later, he transforms into a liberal preacher, prattling surrealist nonsense in the bright glare cast by unseen white authority: "Uhhherr...as I was sayin'...Mas'uh...Mister Tastyslop. [...] We Kneegrows are ready to integrate [...] The blippy rump of stomach bat has corrinked a lip to push the thimble. Yass. Yass. Yass..." (1978:142). At the end of the performance, both white authority and the Tom are eliminated. The latter's head is thrown onto the stage, interrupting the roof-raising audience-participation dance with which Baraka concludes the pageant.

On the face of it, the message here is straightforward: traitors must be dealt with severely. However, this message is nested in ways reminiscent of "A Poem for Willie Best." Because the Tom is associated with the spotlight, there is an implicit warning that the Black subject must avoid the gaze of the "white eye" in public and private life alike—and, by extension, shun the very idea of protest, as protest implies an orientation, both rhetorically and phenomenologically, toward the oppressor (Sell 2005:249). Baraka suggests that it is not just ideology and loyalty that determine whether one is truly "Black," but whether one is willing to step onto the stage and into the white eye, step into the theatre of (mis)recognition.

If Baraka's Tom is an irredeemable traitor who is ignorant of the politics of theatre, the eponymous preacher in Ben Caldwell's *Prayer Meeting, or, The First Militant Minister* (1968) suggests a more mercurial subjectivity and a broader horizon for the white eye, casting not only the "Tom" in unflattering light, but militant Blackness, too, especially its cult of personality. Sadly, Caldwell is a writer little known outside of the BAM community. His specialty was agitprop, and I consider his work on par with that of the Blue Blouse cadres of the Popular Front era and El Teatro Campesino of the 1960s and '70s. Believing that laughter is the best catalyst for learning, Caldwell's plays follow through on the agitprop obligation to instruct and move, but they almost always inject caustic irony into the mix—the sort of self-reflective gesture that we consistently see in BAM works about blackface. That is the case with *Prayer Meeting*. The scenario is boldly sketched: a Burglar breaks into an apartment, hears the resident entering, and hides behind a dresser. Enter the resident, a Minister, exhausted, who drops to his knees and prays, bemoaning his inability to convince his community that they shouldn't riot in response to the killing of a local youth. The Minister wails:

> I tried to show them where it was really brother Jackson's fault fo' provokin' that off'cer. There's a time for protest and a time for silence. They say the off'cer hit him a few times. Brother Jackson could've taken a *little* beatin'. It wouldn't be the first time he'd taken a beating. Now the people want to go down-town and raise hell, Lord. They talk of vengeance! We should leave such things in yo' hands. You said, Vengeance is Mine, Lord. (Caldwell 1968:5)

The absurdity of his dialogue is doubled by the stage directions, which ask the actor to speak and move "as though he's rehearsing a role he plays, checking to hear if he sounds convincing in this role" (5). Thus, even when exhausted, the Minister remains in the spotlight. Apparently something of an activist in his off hours, the Burglar replies in disgust, "Aw, man shut up and get up off your mother-fuckin' knees!" (5). A theologian to boot, the Burglar pretends to be God, instructing the Minister in the finer points of lex talionis, commanding him to lead the "protest march to end all protest marches" (7). Always willing to follow the word of his Lord, the Minister

> (*lays the Bible down, reaches into the drawer, takes out a revolver, checks it, places the Bible and gun atop the table. He walks to the dresser, stands before the mirror, and affects a pulpit pose.*) Brothers and sisters, I had a talk with God last night. He told me to tell you that the time has come to put an end to this murder, suffering, oppression, exploitation to which the white man subjects us. The time has come to put an end to the fear which, for so long, suppressed our actions. The time has come. (8)

At first blush, Caldwell's Minister seems to be a twin to the simpering surrealist in *Slave Ship*: a hollow man who shifts his position whenever the voice of authority calls. However, there is no indication that the fire-and-brimstone rhetoric he adopts is any more substantive or authentic than the weak-kneed complaint he mouths earlier in the play. Even when militant, he remains a subservient, inauthentic performer. By extension, his militant rhetoric is just as subservient and inauthentic. Ultimately, the issue is not the language the Minister uses. He offers the crowd not effective leadership but moving, empowering language to express what the community already wants. Caldwell's message is that religious leaders are always blackface clowns. The question is not about whether they wear the mask, but about those for whom they perform.

Anti-blackface attitudes informed intergenerational relations, too. As James Smethurst (2005) and Lorenzo Thomas (2000) have shown, there were durable connections between the young African Americans who led the BAM and "old heads" such as Queen Mother Audley Moore, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Garveyites, Communists, and Afrocentrists who resisted white power throughout the first half of the 20th century. Even so, the rhetoric of the generation gap was as prominent in the BAM as it was everywhere else during the 1960s—and it was particularly vitriolic wherever generational tensions intersected with class. The "new breed," as Peter Labrie called them (1968; referencing James Brown's "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag"), were often suspicious of older middle-class African Americans, as evident in works by Haki Madhubuti, Marvin X, Sonia Sanchez, Jimmy Garrett, Ed Bullins, and others.

In *Great Goodness of Life* (1966; Baraka 1991a)—subtitled *A Coon Show*—Baraka throws a middle-aged, middle-class African American postal worker before a Kafkaesque tribunal, where he is accused of harboring a murderer. Represented by an attorney described as a "bald-headed, smiling house slave in a wrinkled dirty tuxedo [...] a wire attached to his back leading offstage" (1991a:228), Court Royal quickly realizes that there is no justice in this theatre, only the absurd manipulation of appearances. The unseen authorities offer a plea deal: the case will be dropped if Royal performs "the final instruction," which is to murder the suspect, who is revealed to be his own son (237). This he does, then declares, "My soul is as white as snow. [...] My life is a beautiful thing," after which he asks his wife, "Hey, Louise, have you seen my bowling bag? I'm going down to the alley for a minute" (239). Here, African American subjectivity becomes a (mis)recognized blackface performance the moment the African American enters the absurd, immoral, and theatrical realms of racist "justice" and fails to understand that morality is not a matter of individual choice but a communal response to systemic evil. More to the point, Baraka's play suggests that it is not so much *how* one performs blackness, but where and for whom one performs.

Bullins's *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1971; Bullins 2006a) is a far more complex critique of the middle-aged African American bourgeoisie, a scathing though surprisingly touching indictment of hardcore hedonism and casual cruelty. During their annual Christmas party, Marie's guests watch 16-mm porn films, talk up their favorite brands of liquor, angle in on adulterous affairs with the younger people at the party, and watch in amusement network news footage of civil rights activists being savaged by police dogs. Bullins counterpoints their greed and superficiality—and the realistic dramaturgy that captures it—with musical interludes, during which Marie and her besotted husband Bill step across the fourth wall into a spotlight, where Marie sings bluesy songs about her life among the African American bourgeoisie while Bill accompanies her with a well-practiced soft-shoe shuffle. Undeniably entertaining and endearing, these moments also show Bullins's interest in Brecht's work; this *gestus* links the characters and the performance to the blackface tradition, shedding historical light on the characters' situations and prodding the audience to reflect on the theatrical experience itself, particularly the pleasure they hope to take from the proceedings. By unexpectedly casting a naturalistic play in the light of popular entertainment, Bullins enables his characters to break the fourth wall—and, by extension, the claustrophobic social setting that makes them unable to reflect on their situations—and compels his audience to consider whether there is a fundamental distinction between a "serious" theatre experience that promotes a critical perspective on the middle-aged

African American bourgeoisie and the titillating, vulgar pleasure of watching Tambo and Bones mug before the interlocutor. As with Baraka and Caldwell, we see Bullins drawing attention to forms of blackface performance that might not be recognized as such but also to the institutional and phenomenological conditions that enable the manifestation of Blackness.

Detourning Blackface

The power, allure, and mutability of blackface racism in the BAM era stemmed from its affective and social ambivalence, its capacity to simultaneously reveal and obfuscate the contradictions of hatred and desire, democracy and absolutism, hyperbolism and referentiality. Further, blackface racism depended on a congeries of theatrical stuff—face paint, verbal dialects, gestural repertoires, sumptuary codes, and the like—that put the lie to the essentialist arguments of white supremacy. Lastly, the methodologies of what might be called "Black blackface" materialized racism in a fashion that enabled both insurgent appropriation and threatening forms of black illegibility. This is particularly apparent in the BAM's use of the practice of ironic appropriation that the Situationists called *détournement*.

In "*Détournement* as Negation and Prelude" (1959; Situationist International 1981), détournement is described as a three-step process, beginning with an act of cultural appropriation—taking an ideologically distasteful newspaper comic strip, advertisement, or movie poster—followed by an act of radical "devaluation" that empties the appropriated materials of their content, causing the appropriated materials "to lose [their] original sense completely" (Situationist International 1981:55). One might take the comic strip, for example, and erase all the words in the dialogue bubbles and narrative boxes. The final step is to introduce new content into the emptied form. The comic strip bubbles and boxes might be filled with quotes from, say, Situationist manifestos. In the end, détournement produces a text in which one encounters "the coexistence [...] of their old senses and their new, immediate senses" (55). The Situationists believed that the "parodic-serious" tone produced by this semiotic mash-up "expresses the contradictions of an era in which we find ourselves confronted with both the urgent necessity and the near impossibility of bringing together and carrying out a totally innovative collective action" (56).

The most significant détournement in the BAM era was the Negro Ensemble Company's production of Douglas Turner Ward's play *Day of Absence* (fig. 1), which appeared in New York on a double bill with his *Happy Ending* at the St. Mark's Playhouse in 1965.[5] Reminiscent of popular television shows of the time such as *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, Ward's script depicts the aftermath of a sci-fi crisis: one morning, all the African American residents suddenly disappear from a small Southern town. Hilarity ensues. The plot is not important—indeed, critics lambasted the play's structure. It is the stage directions that matter. Ward writes that the play "is conceived for performance by a Negro cast, a reverse minstrel show done in white-face" (Ward [1966] 1971:36). Detourning the masks, gests, and comic tropes of the blackface minstrelsy tradition, Ward reveals whiteness to be a contradictory conjunction of performance, hegemony, and discipline. Further, he underlines the contingent nature of whiteness: While there is an absence of blacks on the dramatic level—the characters are all white—they are ubiquitous in the production, as all the visible performers are African American. Whiteness

5. A good argument can be made that Ward and the Negro Ensemble Company are not part of the BAM. No doubt, there was tension in Manhattan between the NEC and the Black Nationalist scene. Why "Negro" and not "Black"? Why so many white administrators, donors, and artists? Regardless, the proximity of *Day of Absence* to the BAM both geographically (staged in Manhattan, one of the capitals of the movement) and conceptually (nonrealistic, provocative, entertaining) makes it a worthy part of the story of blackface and the Black Arts Movement. Further, it was applauded by the BAM community for breaking one of the most venerable traditions in African American humor into the mainstream: making fun of white people. It won two Obies for Ward, one for writing, one for acting (he played the Mayor).

is literally *produced* by African Americans, both in the world of the play and on the stage. And while there is no doubt that the primary target is white Southern society, Northern liberal sensibilities are targeted, too: To avoid "horrifying discrimination doubts," Ward suggests that the Announcer be played by a "bona fide white actor" and that a "Negro thespian in pure native black" be cast as Rastus (36). Indeed, blackface racism is linked to US culture as a whole. "This is a red-white-and-blue play," he writes, "meaning the entire production should be designed around the color scheme of our patriotic trinity" (37). The détournement Ward pulls off here not only reduces the grand myth of Southern whiteness to comic absurdity, but puts its finger in the eye of Northern liberals, too, whose pleasure in the proceedings derives from hypocritical moral superiority (those ignorant Southerners!), guilty pleasures (the repertoire and scenarios of blackface, still quite familiar), and the sweet comforts of ironic distance.

A similar turn can be seen in Jeff Donaldson's painting *Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy* (1963; fig. 2). While variations on Donaldson's theme can be seen in works by Betye Saar, Joe Overstreet, Jon Onye Lockard, Murray DePillars, and others (see Wallace-Sanders 2006), his is the most interesting. Appropriating two icons of the US breakfast table, he manages to pull off a complicated trick. First, he detourns the mammy stereotype, transmogrifying her soft, welcoming arms and unflagging, maple-scented smile into the mighty arms and furious gaze of Sojourner Truth. Simultaneously, he detourns another icon, the recently minted Doughboy of the Pillsbury brand (introduced in 1962). The obvious point of the latter is to make fun of the policeman's doughy paunch, but Donaldson's visual synonymization of cop and commodity highlights the links between commercial culture (driven by the Quaker and Pillsbury companies and the advertising firms that marketed their products) and racist imperialism. The connection is amplified by situating the pantry melee against a stylized US flag, its red and white stripes distorted to suggest a Nazi swastika. Predicting by a decade two of the paradigmatic moves of critical whiteness studies, Ward and Donaldson's détournements of blackface (1) identify whiteness as the fundamental racial category upon which all others depend; (2) suggest that this category is naturalized and obfuscated by the performativity of everyday life; and (3) highlight the institutional, commercial, theatrical, and geopolitical matrix that enables white supremacy.

Baraka also used détournement to cast light on the contradictions of racist consciousness and its preferred modes of gazing on African Americans. In *JELLO* (1970), he detourns *The Jack Benny Show*, the popular radio and television series that featured the fine-tuned, if stomach-turning, performance of Eddie Anderson as Rochester, Benny's valet. Baraka names his version "Ratfester" and has him plot the destitution and destruction of his employer to caustic comic effect—all sponsored, as the title suggests, by the popular Kraft-brand dessert. Larry Neal considered the play an especially important shot against white hegemony, one that stood with Baraka's *The Slave* (1964) in terms of delineating a revolutionary vision of Black Power from within the most degraded and insulting dimensions of white supremacy. In "The Black Arts Movement," first published in the 1968 Black Theatre special issue of *TDR*, Neal writes,

> There is a minor element in *The Slave* that appears in a later play entitled *JELLO*. Here I refer to the emblem of Walker's army: a red-mouthed, grinning field slave. The revolutionary army has taken one of the most hated symbols of the Afro-American past and radically altered its meaning. This is the supreme act of freedom, available only to those who have liberated themselves psychically. (1968:72)

Neal characterizes Ratfester and the flag-carrying revolutionaries as "*blues people* smiling and shuffling while trying to figure out how to destroy the white thing. And like the blues man, he is the master of the understatement" (72). For Neal, these detourned blackface icons do more than reveal the contradictions of contemporary commercial culture; they are of a piece with the radical reevaluation of Western culture—and the psychic freedom subtending such a reevaluation—that Baraka advances in his groundbreaking history of African American music, *Blues People* (1963). In that book, Baraka describes blues and jazz art forms that had preserved African

Figure 2. Jeff Donaldson, Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Doughboy *(1963). Oil on canvas 48 x 48 inches. Collection of artist (from Powell 1997; courtesy of Mike Sell)*

cultural traditions, critically appropriated the materials and modes of Western music, articulated an ethos of resistance and subversion, and made possible varied and innovative modes of social gathering in a society that persistently denied social identity to African Americans. Even more radically, Neal views Ratfester and the pickaninny banners of the Black Revolution as the artistic equivalents of the coups, insurgencies, and uprisings that were tearing down the political, economic, and cultural structures of white supremacy from Vietnam to Birmingham. In sum, the détournements Ward, Donaldson, and Baraka construct identify and exploit the affective and semiotic contradictions of blackface racism, revealing and appropriating the subversive violence and volatile desires embedded in its iconography and repertoire.

The Agitprop Closet Drama

Blackface Racism as Totalitarian Ideology

As we've seen, aesthetic questions about blackface always implicated institutional questions, requiring those who wished to challenge blackface racism not only to thematize the institutional and discursive grounds of their challenge by way of imagery, character, scenario, plot, and so on, but also to position that challenge in ways that would materialize those institutional dimensions in the moment of artistic encounter. This required artists to think very carefully about their roles. Of course, this is one of the questions that perennially face critical creators

who align themselves with oppositional political movements and organizations: How does one balance freedom of expression with accountability to the cause? But this was a particularly fraught issue for BAM artists, critics, and curators, as Mary Ellen Lennon notes:

> While the purpose of Black Art—liberation—was clearly defined, what the art would look like remained unspecified. The debate over form and function raised crucial questions for artists: What constituted the Black Aesthetic? Was it one particular style or subject matter? If so, did that delegitimize other styles identified with Western aesthetic conventions even if interpreted by an artist of African descent? What did an "integral" relationship with the African American community mean for the individual artist? (2006:97)

Lurking in these questions was the vexed issue of *authenticity*. If Blackness could be defined as a specific style (as it often was), then wasn't revolutionary Blackness just a new and improved form of blackface, a revamped burnt-cork dandy, black leather and raised fist in place of French lace and mincing gait? By extension, isn't any definition of Blackness, no matter how assiduously attentive to the *situation* of its articulation and enactment, capable of marginalizing and erasing its diversity?

Aware of these concerns, a number of BAM theorists attempted to develop critically self-reflexive conceptions of Blackness based on nonobjective, performative concepts such as "feeling," "release from objecthood," and "soul," the idea being to materialize, legitimate, and empower a revolutionary Black praxis while highlighting and circumventing reification and homogenization (see Sell 2001a). The introduction to Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973) illustrates this effort. He argues that certain kinds of texts manifest a unique quality that certain readers (i.e., African American readers) instinctively "know." This quality, which Henderson calls "saturation," is the material component of the larger "Soul Field" surrounding African American expression, which he describes as "the complex galaxy of personal, social, institutional, historical, religious, and mythical meanings that affect everything we say or do as Black people sharing a common heritage" (1973:41). As Houston Baker Jr. notes, Henderson's theory attempts to mediate specific performances of Blackness—i.e., "In what place and by what means does 'Blackness' achieve form and substance?" (1984:77)—with more transcendent conceptions of African-diasporic and African American culture (79). However, he continues, Henderson's attempt to mediate the material and the immaterial pitches the theory of Blackness into a kind of "romantic Marxism" buoyed by an "impressionistic chauvinism" that promotes "cultural xenophobia" (82–83).

Attending to Baker's criticisms, Kimberly Benston agrees that Henderson's theory appears to position Blackness "in the space of its own tautology, allowing only the choice between a hypertrophied [...] and an empty [...] blackness: the blacker you are...the blacker you are" (2000:15). However, he points out that Henderson, like others who attempted to theorize a nonreifiable Blackness, describes not an essentialist, tautological, ontological conception of Blackness but rather a "formal" or hermeneutic "barrier to culturally inspecific, historically relativizing, reductive appropriations of visionary black expression" (15). Further, Henderson's theory presumes that Black expression is not mimetic but rather methectic, presuming the active participation or "helping out" of the reader in the construction of the text and its relationship to the world. Thus, Henderson et al. articulate a performative *practice* of Blackness that constructs, in its articulation and application, a "spiritual barrier to imperialistic or depoliticized parsings of black textuality" (15). As Benston puts it, Blackness in such a formulation is "not bland reiteration of received ontology or iconicity" but remains perennially open to the "determination of performance's construction in a diversified network of choices and constraints" (2000:16).

This leads us to Ed Bullins and a curious, and highly performative genre that I would call "agitprop closet drama," developed during Bullins's 1967–73 tenure as writer-in-residence at Harlem's New Lafayette Theatre. A remarkably prolific writer—he has told me on several

occasions that playwriting is how he thinks—Bullins is also remarkably eclectic. He has written in a wide range of genres, including happenings, rituals, grand guignol, *opéra bouffe*, realistic domestic dramas, television sitcoms, sci-fi movies, and shaggy dog theatricals. Such eclecticism reflects a restless character but also the diversity of his targets and his incisive attentiveness to the material and institutional bases of artistic endeavor and white hegemony. And it reflects his concern that (*pace* Lennon et al.), no matter how assiduously attentive the movement was to ideology, institutions, and materiality, blackface racism would remain on the scene. Indeed, in two of the performance pieces he wrote during the early 1970s, he suggests that blackface racism is a totalitarian ideology so deeply embedded in US culture that all one can hope to achieve is a more refined understanding of its ubiquity and one's position relative to it.

Consider, for example, the short piece *Malcolm '71, or; Publishing Blackness* (1971). The scene opens on "Blackman" in his study, surrounded by "books of Blackness, revolution, nation/building, Black poetry, drama, literature, How-to-be-Black, etc." The phone rings. He answers, "Black Aesthetics Limited." On the other end of the line, heard but not seen by the audience, is "Whitegirl," calling on the recommendation of Professor "Jack Hack," "the white professor who teaches poetry and aesthetics at the new Black Revolutionary Third World City university, [...] the Black Students' victory for burning down the administration building during that dreadful hassle over Black Studies." In the background, a dog barks. Whitegirl explains that she is assembling an anthology of "Radical/Protest/People's Poetry." The dog barks again. Blackman asks what the dog's name is. She tells him "Malcolm" (as in "X"). Blackman hangs up. Curtain (2006b:135–36).

Malcolm '71 is a classic agitprop play: It communicates a clear and simple political message and encourages concrete action from its viewers. By breaking contact with the offstage editor and the even farther offstage Jack Hack, Blackman avoids inclusion in the anthology and, by extension, dog-like domestication and reification in the historical lineage of "anarchists, wobblies [*sic*], nihilists, etc." (135). But the play's seemingly simple message alters when we take account of the medium and the institutional, discursive, and social issues highlighted by Lennon et al. In a theatre, the play suggests that reading and writing aren't sufficiently Black. Blackness requires more than text; it demands *embodiment*, a distinctly masculine, electronically hardwired, and charismatic kind of embodiment. Blackness also requires voice—the dramatic conflict plays out on the phone—and the ability to hear well in order to detect the barking dog. The dramatic resolution in a theatre would be a palpable one, with Blackman achieving a kind of empowering somatic being. When he hangs up the phone, the possibility of racial-textual miscegenation is eliminated because Blackman stands, touches, hears, and talks independently of the white eye. In the theatre, *Malcolm '71* is about the Black body victorious, alone, and surrounded by words but not determined by them. Well, not just words; Blackman is Black in the theatre because he is surrounded by spectators who witness and affirm his action and identity, who recognize him within a specific, situated manifestation of Henderson's "Soul Field." Intriguingly, this moment of witness and affirmation signals the end of the spectacle; a moment after he hangs up the phone, the lights go down: "Blackness." When he hangs up the phone, the performance ends. Audience dismissed. Implicitly: you cannot see me, though my commitment remains. My Blackness does not depend on your presence.

However, if the medium of staging is the page and the reader's imagination—the virtual theatre of imagination—the politics alter in significant ways. When read in, say, *The Black Scholar*, the journal in which the play originally appeared, or an anthology such as the one I edited a few years ago (Sell 2006), the politics of Black embodiment shift materially to what is in our hands and what is around us. On that textual stage, Blackman is nothing but words, and the performance of Blackness materializes through an act of imagination. And on that textual-conceptual stage, his triumphant hang-up doesn't offer anything close to the resolution that would be suggested in the theatre. Despite Blackman's conclusive gesture, he's in the anthology, turned into a representative Black Revolutionary, a revolutionary in typeset blackface.

This deconstructive dynamic between textual and performed Blackness is why I would call *Malcolm '71* an "agitprop closet drama," a deliberate oxymoron. To recall, agitprop refers to art that is overtly political and didactic, a tool for informing people about political issues in a way that moves them to action. Agitprop is about action; in the absence of palpable real-world effects, the agitprop work is a failure. Sadly, agitprop artworks, as a rule, aren't all that interesting to study if you're looking for complexity, nuance, or ambiguity. These qualities are exactly what you get with closet drama. The closet drama is intended primarily for reading in one's private room (e.g., closet) and for contemplation, not action. While they categorically assume staging, as is evident from their use of script conventions such as stage directions and dialogue, they pose profound challenges to theatrical production. For example, Gertrude Stein's plays are full of fragmented characters, mercurial settings, and multifunctioning stage directions that make any staging (whether in the mind or in the theatre) challenging, if not impossible.

Martin Puchner (2002) sees in the closet drama a kind of "resistance to theatre" that, while quintessentially modernist in its attentiveness to medium, belongs to the long tradition of antitheatrical prejudice. He argues that, by posing these kinds of challenges to readers, actors, designers, and directors, the modernist closet drama problematizes the relationship between page and stage and, in doing so, ethically charges the processes of theatrical realization and foregrounds the materiality of reading. No doubt the act of producing the closet drama—onstage or in the mind—is a fascinatingly volatile moment. In that moment of production, the closet drama manifests the ethical, political, and moral dimensions of writing, reading, observing, and criticizing, highlighting what Mike Vanden Heuvel has described as the "transformation of knowledge in the act of producing it" (1993:165). However, Puchner's analysis of the closet drama is of little relevance when we move outside the European, Eurocentric modernist tradition. This is most evident in his argument that the primary anxiety for the writer of the modernist closet drama is about the performer's body, a presumption he takes from Jonas Barish (1985).

Bullins's plays evince no such anxiety. Indeed, such anxiety would be absurd for someone who, like so many African American artists committed to the performing arts, lived in a society that denied them control of their own bodies and brutally delimited their opportunities to perform their art and identities. And he isn't alone. Larry Neal (1968) considered the performer the very apotheosis of the Black Revolutionary Artist and called for all African American artists to figure out how they might make their art scream like James Brown, duck and weave like Muhammad Ali, and subvert authority like Ratfester. Bullins's works are anxious not about performers but about *performance*.

Nevertheless, the agitprop closet drama does follow Puchner's model in that it explores and exploits the differences between reading and staging. These differences allow Bullins to assess, materialize, explore, and dramatize the structures of writing, staging, and performance as they relate to questions of race and racism, and particularly to the reification of Blackness. He is thereby able to articulate a revolutionary conception of Blackness within a multiply liminal space, deconstructing the lines between concept and practice, the anti- and pro-theatrical, the isolated space of the reader and the communitarian space of the spectator, the ideal and the material, performance and the performative. As *Malcolm '71* demonstrates, in this space it can be difficult to identify or stabilize the differences between an empowering concept of the "Black face" that demands recognition from white power on its own terms and the "blackface" of reified revolution.[6]

6. It is therefore not surprising to discover that, when given the opportunity to edit a special issue of *TDR*, Bullins engaged in a form of "editorial performance" that spoke in very different fashion to its two audiences: the usual readership of the journal and the many black artists and theorists eager to learn more about the movement. As I have argued elsewhere (Sell 2001b and 2005), the special 1968 issue on Black Theatre can be read as a thoroughgoing critique (and a very clever parody) of the putatively revolutionary aesthetics advocated by editor Richard

One of the especially peculiar things about the Black Arts Movement's discourse on blackface is how little of it reflects directly on the face as such, despite the fact that African American faces have played such a significant role in racism and the fight against it. Along with genitalia, the African American face has been the supreme fetish of white supremacy in the United States. The face is almost always the gravitational center of racist desire, the soft, expressive, vulnerable focus of some of white supremacy's most titillating and cherished stereotypes. Just as surely, it was the face whose presence was denied through legal and cultural codes governing eye contact and posture and, of course, through acts of violence, perhaps most memorably in the case of Emmett Till. Murdered in 1955 at the age of 14, Till's lively eyes and expressive mouth were obliterated by fist blows and decomposition. Searching for the perfect metaphor to describe the conditions of African Americans in post-Reconstruction America, W.E.B. Du Bois chose the veil, invoking both the article of clothing that simultaneously protects and denies identity and (though this second meaning is rarely recalled) the caul, the thin amniotic film that occasionally covers the face of newborn children and is considered by some to be the sign of mystical powers. In Du Bois's double sense, the veil provides both a cloaked perspective on the world in which it is worn and a source of magical power: "The Negro," he writes, "is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (1903:5). Paul Laurence Dunbar memorably declared in 1895, "We wear the mask that grins and lies" (2004:918), in the poem that would inspire Baraka's meditations on the powers and pitfalls of the "renegade mask." At the heart of the struggle of African Americans was the demand to be recognized, to have white power look at them face to face and grant them recognition, attention, and visibility. Though this desire to present the face to white power was less accepted among the artists and activists of the Black Arts Movement (who, as I've discussed, were not interested in orienting their revolutionary messages toward whites and, when they did, did so ironically), the face was nevertheless a key site for the articulation of revolutionary Blackness.

It is the face that is the subject of another agitprop closet drama by Bullins: *A Short Play for a Small Theatre* (1970; Bullins 2006c). The scenario is simple. The lights come up on a tall African American male sitting at a small table, applying makeup to his face—abstract shapes and multicolored lines, dots, and circles in high contrast with his dark skin. Bullins stipulates that the audience be a small one, arranged on three sides of the performer, with no audience member beyond his reach. This proximity guarantees that the particularities of the man's face are easily visible. Another stipulation: white people must be present but as a minority. Once his face is adequately decorated, the actor is directed to wipe his hands on a towel, put on soft leather gloves, pick up a handgun, and shoot every white person in the theatre in the face. "If there is need," the script concludes, "he should unhurriedly reload as many times as necessary and complete his assignment" (Bullins 2006c:216).

Violence, race, and a modernist-style meditation on the relationship of form, content, and medium collide in a play that ranks with the infamous Surrealist fantasy of walking into a crowd and firing a gun at random, or Valerie Solanas's 1968 shooting of Andy Warhol. But like *Malcolm '71*, this play implicates its social, performative, and media dimensions in order to materialize obfuscated ideological dimensions of blackface racism and thereby enable insurgent, noncommodifiable forms of black identity. It is, first of all, semiotically sanitized. Bullins writes, "The space should be painted black—stage, walls, ceiling, seats, etc. No posters, no slogans, no liberation flags, etc." (216). In the late 1960s, this was highly unusual; posters, handbills, and flags were the tickbirds of the counterculture, riding along wherever the movement traveled.

Schechner and *TDR*'s contributors as well as a highly selective unveiling of the work developed across the country by black critical creators committed to the revolutionary overthrow of white power. Harry Elam Jr. develops this argument further (2006).

By banning such messages, Bullins attempts to disconnect the performance from formulaic, advertisement-style expressions of Blackness. The performer is similarly sanitized; again, he is directed to apply abstract "stripes," "dots," and "circles," implying that, like the black walls of the theatre, there should be no overt historical or ideological reference to blacking up.

These two stage directions—one governing the *space*, the other governing the *face* of performance—put race and racialized violence at a kind of "degree zero," to recall Roland Barthes. Severed from history, the performance becomes, in Barthes's words, "colorless, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language" (1977:82). But why do this? Why attempt to bracket an act of violence so obviously about race? After all, the absence of ideological signs does not by any means imply that they aren't present. Indeed, they are all the more present due to their absence; they are "not not there."

The face is the key. It is the crux of the play's dramatic crisis and the most important stage prop: it is the face that is painted, the face that is shot. Indeed, the face—both the performer's and the white spectators'—undergoes a remarkable set of transformations in the piece, morphing between visibility and invisibility, subjectivity and stereotype, the index of a unique self and a mere thing. Typically, the face of a dramatic actor is an index of the character he portrays, perceived by the audience as inseparable from the performer but signifying another subjectivity. However, in the case of *A Short Play for a Small Theatre*, this other subjectivity is nonspecific—he is identified in the script simply as a "tall BLACK MAN." Further, in the act of painting, the performer's face is turned into something else. It is objectified, turned into a prop of kinds; in Andrew Sofer's words, "a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by the actor in the course of performance" (2003:11). Simultaneously individualized through the attention paid to it by his hands and the audience's intense gaze and abstracted through color and the lack of identifying character marks, the actor's face is rendered both aesthetically unique and phenotypically general. He is, to take Barthes's oddly racialized metaphor literally, "colorless," in a state of "freedom from all bondage to a pre-ordained state" (1977:82). But, of course, the traces of "color" and "bondage" remain.

The faces of the white spectators undergo a similar set of transformations. At the start of the performance, they exist in that peculiar condition typical of the modern Western theatre: anonymous, sitting quietly among themselves, yet individualized, perceiving the action from their own seats, their own perspectives, a position rented for the price of a ticket. The violence wrought on their faces radically alters that condition, rips their anonymity and individuality from them, reducing their faces to a mere index of their whiteness. And though my conversations with Bullins indicate that he did not know the works of Emmanuel Levinas, it is hard not to read this work as situated within the moment that Levinas understood as the exemplary if always singular moment of ethics: the face-to-face encounter of two people, at once individual and deindividualized, self and sign (Levinas 1969).

Recall that *A Short Play for a Small Theatre* is an agitprop closet drama, one that must be understood, like any agitprop piece, as oriented toward staging and real-world action. If this play were to be actually performed, what would be the aftermath? How would the faces in this performance exist outside the small theatre, both those covered in paint and those left bloodied? One can easily imagine the headlines and talking heads, the cries for reform on statehouse floors, the handwringing and lofty speeches by religious leaders, the outrageous remarks by attention-seekers. In the same way that *Malcolm '71*'s Blackman hangs up a phone only to find himself inserted into the very discourse he hoped to evade, the actor—indeed, the entire crew, the director, the owner of the theatre, and the playwright—would become symbols of the "race problem," thrown into a whirling vortex of rhetoric and representation. The performer's face, which had in the moment of performance existed in a liminal state between index of subjectivity and object for manipulation, would be conclusively determined, reified. Reproduced endlessly in the media, it would become an overdetermined sign of communal guilt, an icon of "reverse

racism." In contrast, the faces of the victims would become more like the actor's face before the shooting. Their stories would be told, their relatives and friends would testify, their faces would be named and known. But, like the performer's, their faces would also be manipulated, exploited, turned into stage props for a national performance of self-righteous, self-occluding white power.

A Short Play for a Small Theatre compels us to consider the material, symbolic, cultural, and ideological meanings of the face in a racialized society. Like *Malcolm '71*, it takes the extensive, comprehensive engagement with blackface racism that we find in the works by Baraka, Caldwell, Donaldson, and others to a far more cynical conclusion, linking a holistic, shifting, heterogeneous conception of Blackness to a totalitarian vision of blackface racism. Together, these two agitprop closet dramas describe a world in which the reification of the African American face into stereotype is inevitable and irrevocable—where even the nonobjectifying hermeneutics of Blackness that Henderson and Benston described are inextricably linked to a total system of racist power and to the embedded ideological, institutional, and discursive structures that reinforce and reproduce it. Even an act of brutal violence will inevitably fail to destroy blackface and the gaze that desires it, a gaze that depends on performance and is enabled by ideology, infrastructure, discipline, and discourse.

Even an act of brutal violence will inevitably fail to destroy blackface and the gaze that desires it, a gaze that depends on performance and is enabled by ideology, infrastructure, discipline, and discourse.

Blackness Beyond Blackface

I do not wish to imply that Bullins's particular perspective on blackface racism and the impossibility of a solvent, revolutionary Blackness is the last or best word on the subject, but it does reflect my sense of where we can take the Black Arts Movement's engagement with blackface as it relates to our own moment, a moment in which antiblack racism has become ever more pervasive even as it becomes more and more coded and obscured (witness the panic over socialism ignited by the election of Barack Obama). The several works and ideas I have surveyed here make clear that blackface was a significant, complex presence in the BAM. Read as a coherent (if diverse) discourse about racial (mis)recognition and insurgent illegibility, they suggest that the Blackness of the Black Arts Movement—and its practical manifestation in representations of varied kinds and contexts—was situational and intensely self-reflexive in its negotiations of African American visibility. That said, the alterity that the critical creators of the BAM attempted to wedge between the Black face and blackface was difficult, if not impossible, to stabilize. This is precisely why these works and ideas are so important to consider. The motile, elusive difference between Blackness and blackface that we find in these works (or that is denied in order to produce threatening forms of ambiguity) is one more reason for us to return to the Black Arts Movement in search of perspectives on the persistent questions surrounding race, identity, and power.

But within the boundaries of the question that I have described here, is there any way to extricate revolutionary Blackness from the totalitarian system of blackface racism? Perhaps. In "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours," Julian Mayfield (1971) recognizes and celebrates the multicultural diversity of the African diaspora while remaining attentive to the pressures that would reduce it to icon and stereotype and to the political necessities that would require it to become totalizing and homogenous. However, what sets Mayfield's essay apart from the works I've explored here is that his representation of Blackness is spurred not by an exemplary "Blackman," but by a non–African American blackface performer. "The hippest guy I know," Mayfield writes, "is a young French Jew who insists that he is black":

> Every other word out of his mouth was "motherfucker," "cat," "man," "brother," "sister," the whole bag. Raoul, as I call him, is a brilliant young man, gifted in several languages, and, I think, a sincere revolutionary. He seems to have read everything about black people that was ever written in French, English, Arabic, and Spanish, and, moreover, has a profounder grasp of what he has read than most blacks I know. (1971:24–25)

Raoul is a master of Blackness; Mayfield can't compete. Raoul is greeted by visiting African American musicians with respect and raucousness; Mayfield is treated like a square. Raoul is a master of the archive and repertoire; Mayfield has no rap with the brothers. Who, Mayfield asks, is the "real" Black man at the bar?

"I gave up and admitted him to the race. If he wanted to be black that bad, then to hell with it" (24). Arguing about essentials or about who is *really* Black and who is merely *playing* Black, Mayfield opines, leads to nothing but frustration, ruined good times, and, most importantly, lost opportunities to advance the lot of planetary humanity. "My point," he writes, "is that superficial appurtenances such as music, language, dress, and slogans, and other 'Black Is Beautiful' fads can so easily be chewed up, digested, and spat out by this vigorous, if sick, society, that no aesthetic is safe within its grinding teeth" (29). Like Bullins, Mayfield understands that any conception of Blackness that depends on the material stuff of skin color or on assumptions about the inextricable connections between phenotype and identity lead to hypocrisy and violence. This is not to say that the performance of blackness by non-blacks is not problematic, but what Mayfield most admires about Raoul is his deep knowledge of and commitment to the history and culture of blackness. Further, Raoul exemplifies the mutual ideas that (a) Blackness must be pushed, poked, and prodded to grow and change as the people need it to grow and change; and that, (b) any representation of Blackness, any enactment of Blackness, must be judged by a single criterion—that it is committed to revolution "so that our children may breathe a purer and freer air" (29). I would argue that Mayfield maps an exit from the mirror halls of blackface racism by emphasizing, like the others I've discussed here, transformative subjectivity but also social and cultural generosity and a pragmatic commitment to helping African American people—and all people—become free creators of themselves, their communities, and their possibilities. "I cannot," he writes, "will not—define my Black Aesthetic, nor will I allow it be defined for me" (27).

The artists, theorists, works, and performances I have surveyed here explicitly and thoroughly contend with the iconography, repertoire, and scenarios of blackface racism, but they also communicate a compelling, thoroughly self-reflexive, highly performative message—a message that is pertinent to our own moment, when calls to "keep it real" echo in a mass-market whirlwind and the Blackness of the first African American president appears to have no consistent relationship to questions of social justice. Further, they confirm the mandate articulated by Harold Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967): If white supremacy is to be brought down, it cannot merely be done through cultural production. Rather, it must contend for hegemony on what I have called, following Cruse, the "triple front" of culture, politics, and economics (Sell 2005). But because these works are so thoroughly attentive to the conditions and dynamics of performance, they suggest a more totalizing struggle than we find in Cruse's book, one that comprehends medium, discourse, and ideology in far more nuanced ways. Finally, the BAM suggests a "third way" that rejects (1) the zero-tolerance attitude towards blackface performance common among liberals as well as (2) the disingenuous tolerance of conservatives. Instead, the BAM developed textual, theatrical, performance, and discursive strategies that sustained the enduring, potent, and problematic presence of blackface in US culture, but linked it to a repertoire of insurgent representational and material-discursive strategies that constructed a Blackness that was devilishly difficult to reify. A survey of the Black Arts Movement's multifarious engagement with blackface racism describes a remarkable picture of racialized power during a period of radical transformation in the very concept of race—a transformation the BAM catalyzed and guided as part of an emerging, global challenge to Empire.

And it affirms the singular (if not central) role of performance and materialist provocation in the movement and to antiracist struggle everywhere. For it is in these that one can raise the pickaninny as the banner of Black Revolution, sustain it as a volatile yet enduring mode of communication between racialized communities, and burn it as the last vestige of a hegemony both illegitimate and perverse.

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